

Student and Community Partner Expectations for Effective Community-Engaged Learning Partnerships

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Student insight and community partner feedback can contribute to understanding and thus improve community-engaged learning practices. Student and community partner voices, however, are not often heard during community-engaged learning development. To ascertain student and community partner expectations for community-engaged learning, thematic analysis was performed on data from two sources: a workshop where five student panelists involved in community-engaged learning discussed their expectations of community-engaged learning, and a survey of community partners ($n = 45$) to examine perspectives on working with students and university partners during community-engaged learning placements.

Student Findings

From their community placements, students expected opportunities to acquire management skills, to exercise leadership skills, and to be given responsibility. They further expected to be exposed to a variety of perspectives on how others view their expertise, and to have an involved community supervisor who would give an orientation of the organization, provide ongoing supervision, and highlight the significance of the work students would perform in their community-engaged learning placement. Students considered their placement to be a safe environment where they could challenge themselves, test learned skills in a professional setting, and connect faces and stories to theories learned in the classroom. To successfully negotiate community and university expectations, students recommended taking ownership of placement experiences and being responsible for one's own work; having ongoing conversations to ensure that one's own and community partners' expectations are being met; learning theory in the classroom and engaging in practicum preparation; using problem-solving skills to navigate unexpected situations; and exploring future opportunities to hone skills.

Community Partner Findings

Community partners appreciated having flexible timeframes and being able to negotiate length of community-engaged learning placements with university partners based on their organization's needs. Traits that they attributed to effective community-engaged learning placements and partnerships were grouped into three areas: placement characteristics, student characteristics, and university partner characteristics. Effective community-engaged learning placements had specific outcomes, were mutually beneficial for organization and university partners, did not require financial support from the organization, and had good community mentors available for students. Effective community-engaged learning students were knowledgeable about and responsible for meeting placement expectations; came to the placement with adequate background, skills, and pre-training; were enthusiastic, motivated, and ready to learn; and had an interest in the organization and their placement tasks. Effective university partners conducted ongoing student supervision during placements, supported students to help them get the most out of their experiences, and shared students' progress with community partners through reports.

Conclusion

To foster effective community-engaged learning partnerships, universities need structures for students to (1) share past community-engaged learning experiences with other students and prepare for community-engaged learning placements; (2) have mutually beneficial conversations with community partners; (3) negotiate with university partners; and (4) receive mentoring and support from university and community partners. Further, universities need to establish structures that enable ongoing conversations between community partners and university partners. University and community partners need to provide feedback, share what they have learned about making student engagement work, and negotiate community-engaged learning placement timelines.

About the Authors

Holly Stack-Cutler is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Alberta. Her research interests include community-based research with vulnerable populations, community-engaged learning, and resilience and social capital of adults with reading difficulties. Stack-Cutler earned her M.A. and M.Ed. at Brock University.

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STUDENT AND COMMUNITY PARTNER EXPECTATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS

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II. Community Partner Perspectives on CEL Partnerships

Community partners approached using the to negotiate the length of CEL placements based on their placement, student, and university partner (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Community Partners' Ideal Length of CEL Placements

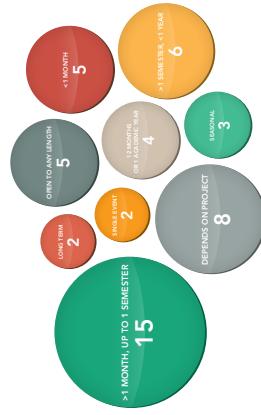


Figure 2. Characteristics of Effective CEL Partnerships: Community Partner Perspectives

DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

- Students feel that CEL placements provide them with opportunities to "learn" theory and apply it in real-life situations. In a recent survey, students and university partners reported that CEL placements were enjoyed in three areas: placement, student, and university partner (see Figure 2).
- Through CEL partnerships, community partners expect to: mentor motivated students, have ongoing conversations with university partners (Lekermann et al., 2002), and share mutually beneficial outcomes with both students and university partners (Cone & Payne, 2002).
- Universities need to have structures for students to (a) share past CEL experiences with other students and prepare for CEL placements; (b) have mutually beneficial conversations with community partners (C) negotiate with placement partners; and (d) receive mentoring and support from university and community partners.
- Universities need to have structures for community partners to (a) have ongoing conversations with university partners and provide feedback to share what they have learned about making student engagement work (d) negotiate CEL placement time lines.

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STUDENT SUGGESTIONS FOR NEGOTIATING COMMUNITY AND UNIVERSITY EXPECTATIONS

Actively Prepare and Communicate

- actively ask questions to clarify community partner's expectations
- have mutually beneficial conversations—before and during placement—to ensure own and community partner's expectations are met
- take on other students in class and inmentoring professor before starting placement
- take ownership of placement experiences and be responsible for own work

Critically Engage with Community Experiences

- learn theory in the classroom and engage in practical application
- understand that theory learned in books does not always dictate placement
- use problem-solving skills to navigate unexpected situations and challenges
- find out if placement can be extended to summer employment; continue to hone skills while the community partner receives services from a trained individual
- "I am a big value and a communication so it was nice to just say 'oh you want me to do that and you are expecting'. So we had a lot of conversations, and me and my supervisor, about what the workplace is going to get and what I was hoping to get. And we did have to do some negotiating along the way because things came up."
- "One of the biggest challenges is that universities and community organizations don't necessarily work on the same time line... real world time lines aren't September 5 to April."

- conduct ongoing supervision of students during placement
- export students to help them get the most out of their placement
- share students' progress with community partners through reports
- "Students are supported by a post secondary co-ordinator and other students in addition to our staff works best for us."

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INTRODUCTION



RESEARCH DATA & METHODS

We conducted a thematic analysis on two types of data:

- Student Perspectives on CEL - presented in a public workshop
- Community Perspectives on CEL - presented in a public workshop

Encouraging students to engage in their community through learning and community partner feedback into their community engaged learning practice. However, students and community partners' voices are often absent during this learning process.

FINDINGS

I. Student Perspectives on CEL - Placement Expectations

A Safe Environment to Learn Skills and Challenge Themselves

- Students expected to acquire management skills, exercise leadership skills, and be given responsibility for their placement.
- Students expected to have opportunities to learn skills and responsibilities of effective student placement from the perspective of their organizations.

II. Community Perspectives on CEL - Placement Expectations

A Safe Environment to Learn Skills and Challenge Themselves

- Students considered their placement to be a safe environment where they could take risks, challenge themselves, and try new things.
- "I think that the biggest expectations over that I would have would be some opportunity and some opportunity to engage with other students or how they would be important. And just the expectation that you have to be ready to learn, that you bring to it and that you fit in with the organization that you are going to be a part of."
- At-risk youth partners (from a local camp) discussed characteristics of effective student placement from the perspective of their organizations.

III. Student Perspectives on CEL - Placement Expectations

Opportunities to Put Classroom Learning into Practice

Opportunities to Multiple Perspectives

- Students expected that their placement to be a place where they could learn skills and abilities in a professional setting.
- Students expected to gain a variety of perspectives on how others view their expertise and areas of interest.
- Students recommended being open to new experiences and learning from mentors and the people one will meet in their placement.
- An Involved Community Supervisor
- Students expected their placement supervisor to provide an orientation of the organization and the tasks expected of them, provide on-going supervision and highlight the significance of their work duties. "For my supervisor I expected myself to have a little bit of a structure maybe an orientation in the beginning. That would be really helpful. And maybe to explain the meaning behind the work I am doing because that is really important I think. To know the purpose of my work rather than just being assigned to a task and being left on my own."

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